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THE STORY OF MOHONK





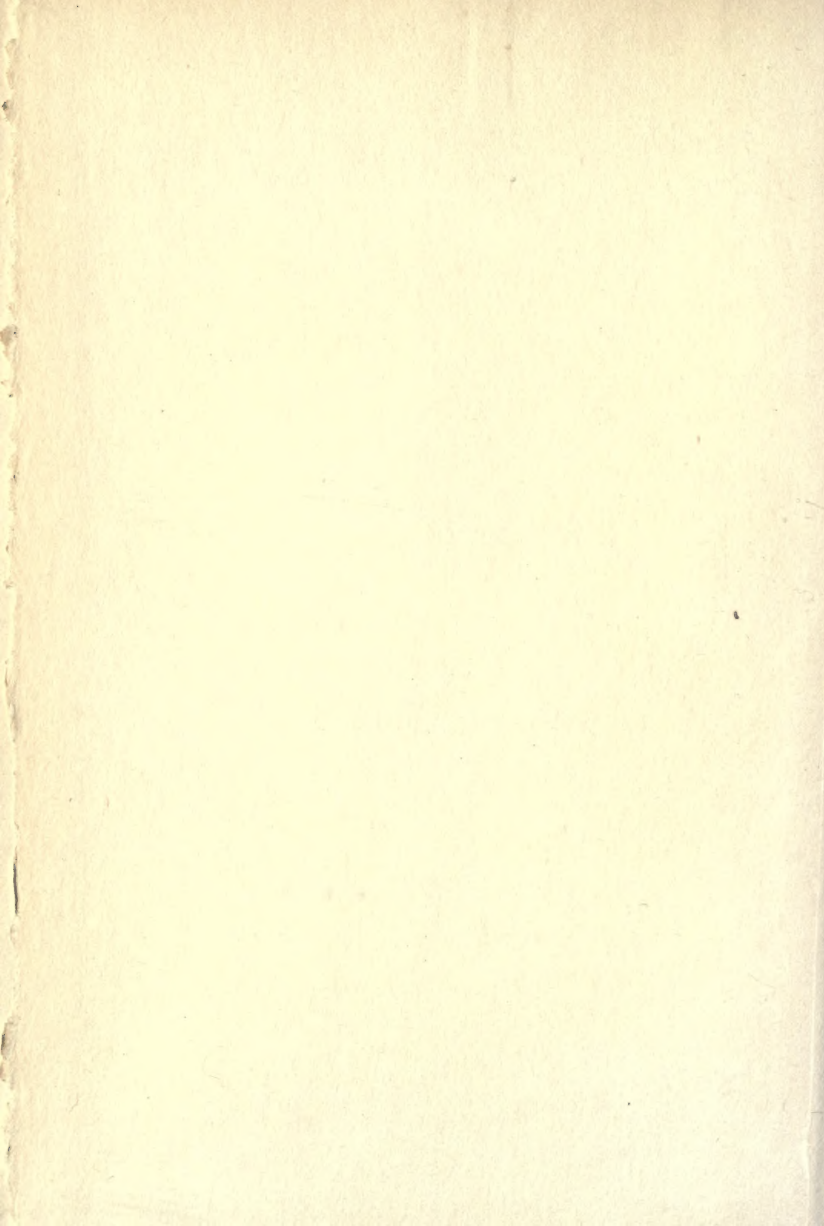
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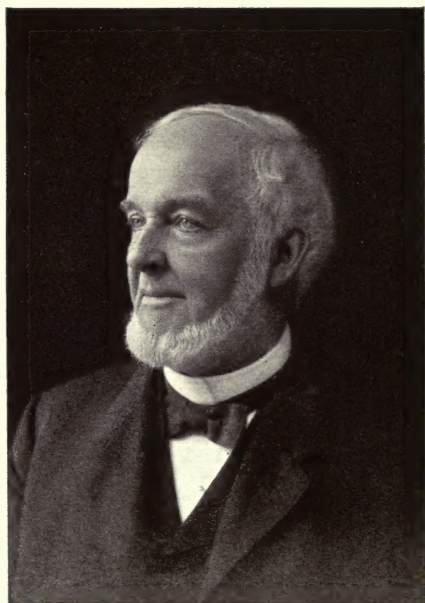






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THE STORY OF MOHONK



Albert K Smiley

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THE STORY
OF MOHONK

BY

FREDERICK E. PARTINGTON



NINETEEN HUNDRED ELEVEN





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PREFACE

THE oft-repeated inquiry as to the history of Mohonk led the publishers of this book to believe that a brief sketch of its founding and growth would be gladly welcomed and cherished by many who have expressed their love for the place by making it their summer home for many seasons.

We sincerely trust that the book will fully gratify those who have expressed their desire for such a work, and wish to assure them that it is in every respect a token of good will and affection to all who care for, or are interested in the story of Mohonk.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Mr. Albert K. Smiley	<i>Frontispiece</i>
The Old Bridge and Mr. Stokes	2
Early Mohonk	2
Boating in the Old Days	6
The First House, 1868	8
Mohonk House as first seen by Mr. Smiley, 1869	8
Mohonk House, 1911	12
Office Building about 1882	14
The "Old Boys"	16
Washington Profile	20
The Trapps	20
View from Eagle Cliff	24
Sky Top Road	24
The Flower Gardens	26
The Great Crevice	30
Undercliff Road	30
Testimonial Gateway	32

THE STORY OF MOHONK

ONE day in the early summer of 1869, Alfred H. Smiley, who was then living near Poughkeepsie, proposed to spend the day at one of two places—either going by steamer down to West Point or going by carriage to a romantic lake, which, he had heard, lay hidden in the mountains west of the Wallkill Valley. What finally led him to the choice of the unknown lake is not clear, but it is interesting to speculate what the future of Lake Mohonk might have been had Mr. Smiley that morning chosen to go to West Point.

The road from the Hudson to New Paltz differed little at that time from the present—but from New Paltz to Mohonk no road of any consequence existed. Local picnic parties strug-

gled up both sides of the mountains over paths that had gradually developed, doubtless, from ancient Indian trails. Approaching the place from the Wallkill Valley side this rude path followed along the eastern shore of the lake. It was under such conditions that Alfred Smiley paid his first visit to Lake Mohonk. He used to tell of his speechless wonder as he caught the first vision of these imprisoned waters; how weary and panting he struggled up that steep rocky path that brought him under the beetling heights of Sky Top; and how suddenly he saw through the dark pines the glittering water—and beyond it the wonderful cliffs rising from the western side of the lake. It had for him all the sensation of a discovery. It was as if now for the first time this lake had been looked upon by a white man.



THE OLD BRIDGE AND MR. STOKES



EARLY MOHONK

There was scarcely a sign of life. The shores were traversed by only a rough path; and the extraordinary fissures, caverns and rock formations that now afford so much delight, were most of them inaccessible—their existence not even suspected. As he saw it then, it could not have differed essentially from what it had been to the Indians. When the white men first appeared in this region—as early as 1614—the lake already had its name, Mohonk—the Lake of the Sky. The valleys were peopled by Indians, Iroquois and Algonquins and other tribes, fighting frequently and frequently moving, and all of them, doubtless, when hard pressed, retreating to the labyrinths of the Shawangunk (pronounced Shongum) mountains. There could be no more baffling maze for the pursuing enemy than what existed then and

exists now in these mountains; and Mr. Smiley has frequently expressed the opinion that he could still hide in the vicinity of the lake so that he could not be found by anybody.

At the time of this first visit of Mr. Smiley, the lake and adjacent property were owned by Mr. John F. Stokes, a farmer in the valley, an excellent man, who had already built a small rude structure where he could entertain picnic parties and, for those who were courageous, could offer lodging. Mr. Smiley has described it graphically:

“There was a little house here in which a man kept a barroom, right under the corner of the present parlor. One room was for dancing, and people came up from the valley and danced all night, for which he charged them one dollar a couple. This man, and an old lady and an Irish boy, ran the establishment. He sold liquor also

though he tried to keep folks from drinking too much. When people, however, really got drunk and hard to manage, Mr. Stokes used to chain them to trees and in that way maintained order. Over the large dancing-room were ten bedrooms, each seven feet long by five feet wide. Each bed was a bunk a foot and a half wide with a straw mattress, one sheet, one quilt and a hen-feather pillow, and each room had one chair. If any one wanted to wash, the lake was handy. When a visitor demanded dinner, the Irish boy would catch a chicken, kill it in front of the house, and pass it over to the woman to cook. On one occasion—when there were no chickens to catch—they caught the pet peacock and the old woman prepared it for the guest. This showed the good nature of Mr. Stokes. He thought a great deal of the peacock but the guest had to have some dinner—though the visitor confessed it was the toughest morsel he ever tackled.”



To the owner of that mountain hut in 1869, Mohonk was doubtless but a lake, and Sky Top no more than a cliff. To the man who had just climbed the mountain and stood enraptured on the other side of the lake, it was a prospect for which he could imagine no bounds. He saw in that quick sweep of his eye the whole future of the place unfolding and forming. He could scarcely believe that business sagacity had thus far missed a chance like this. He was standing less than a hundred miles from the metropolis of the country; he was surrounded by romantic natural features absolutely unknown to the great outside world—and so unique in character that they could be brought into no comparison with any other known region of the eastern states.

He was ferried across the lake; roamed enthusiastically from point to

BOATING IN THE OLD DAYS





point; and could scarcely wait in patience till he should send word to his twin brother Albert. It is a pity that the letter he wrote has not been preserved. It reached his brother, who was then at the head of the well-known and successful Friends' School of Providence, R. I., at a time of year when the activities of the school were at their height and when no thought of anything else could be entertained. But here was a message from his brother—a wise, conservative man of great business sense—asking him to leave everything and to come to an obscure lake in New York state. He had a prompt reply ready. He sent word that it would be impossible. To a second appeal, however, Mr. Albert Smiley, though still protesting, came on from Providence, and together the twin brothers visited the lake. The owner,

Mr. Stokes, was there to meet them, and on that day they climbed to Sky Top. Mr. Albert Smiley relates that "Mr. Stokes did not appreciate some features of natural beauty. 'I suppose,' said he, 'that the Creator made everything for some use; but what in the world He ever made this pizen laurel for I can't see. It never grows big enough for firewood and the cattle won't eat it.'" The old man talked only of firewood, fodder, and area. He believed he had three hundred acres to dispose of—he had a map to prove it; but as the three men walked up to Sky Top and the view began to widen, it was evident that it was not a question of map or of acres with the two schoolmasters. They passed above the huge boulders that lie like a great chaos, and from the labyrinth they saw the lake with its indescribable color



THE FIRST HOUSE, 1868



MOHONK HOUSE AS FIRST SEEN BY MR. SMILEY, 1869



far below; they watched the gradual unfolding of the two fertile valleys and the Catskill range against the western sky, and finally at the summit, saw the white waters of the Hudson at West Point, and the far away hills of at least five adjacent states. They looked down as upon a kingdom. Both men were greatly impressed, and talking it over together agreed, as they generally did upon all questions, that before they parted that day from Mr. Stokes, an option on the property should be secured by the brother Albert. The price demanded for it was forty thousand dollars. The price paid was twenty-eight thousand dollars. "I spent every dollar I had," said Mr. Smiley, "and ran in debt fourteen thousand dollars. My sole purpose was to provide a home and in order to pay for it I started in a business for

which, above all things in the world, I had a distaste and no experience. I suppose that hotel keeping was the very last thing in my mind until I bought this place, when I was about forty-five years old. I had no more thought of it than of going to the moon. I had graduated from Haverford and was a teacher both by training and by taste. I had been nine years at the head of the Friends' School in Providence when I bought Mohonk; I remained at the head of it ten years longer in order to earn money for my new venture."

Mr. Albert Smiley therefore found himself suddenly in the hotel business. In the summer of 1870, the original house, erected by Mr. Stokes, was a trifle remodeled and made to accommodate about forty guests. They were nearly all personal friends from Phila-

delphia and from New York. Still averse to the details of hotel work, Mr. Smiley employed a manager, who managed things so badly that the next year he persuaded his brother Alfred to superintend the business features, and began an organized policy which has ever since marked the growth and success of Lake Mohonk.

There is a story prevalent to the effect that the original owner was a Quaker who refused to let the property go unless a compact was made never to sell liquor in the hotel. On the contrary, Mr. Stokes had always sold liquor and tried to persuade Mr. Smiley to keep on selling it—at least to the neighbors! And he had other serious ambitions; for he urged the new owners to establish a race-course near what is now known as the Home Farm; and he evidently was convinced

that with liquor for the neighbors and guests, and a race-course for amusement and for a source of income, the venture would prove a great success. The opinion of the old tavern keeper was probably shared by all other hotel men and most of the public. It seemed preposterous to conduct a house without a bar; and still more preposterous to exclude cards and dancing. But Mohonk had no difficulty in meeting the awful prophecies of failure. The hotel was full in its first season and has been full ever since.

The original purchase called for three hundred acres. As a matter of fact there were only two hundred and eighty acres. Besides the lake it included what is now the tennis-courts, a narrow strip along Eagle Cliff, a little of the Home Farm and Sky Top, and ended in the garden where the hotbeds now are.



MOHONK HOUSE, 1911



This first purchase, however, was but the beginning. It became almost immediately manifest that no amount of moral force could preserve the character of Mohonk and keep away nuisances. The history of nearly every great estate is a record of self protection. In the first place, neighbors in the country do not always share your respect for natural scenery and natural objects. If wood is needed, they cut down the trees, even along the roadside—the best and the biggest; if large berry crops are wanted, they do not hesitate to set fire to acres and acres and imperil a whole county; if they need building stone—they blow up a historic precipice; if they seek drainage they foolishly pollute a mountain stream. To protect Mohonk from all these dangers, Mr. Smiley began a series of purchases. He was surrounded

by farms, and one after another they were added to his holdings. "The hardest work I ever did in my life," said Mr. Smiley, "was the buying of those farms." No sooner was a menace disposed of in one direction than another one appeared somewhere else. It was a perennial contest. Farms good, bad and indifferent had to be gathered in. Some were promptly developed for dairy purposes—and still contribute to the supplies of the house. Some continued to be used for crops and for the support of cattle and horses. For several years some of them yielded abundant quantities of fruit. It has taken over one hundred distinct purchases to establish the present state of immunity. From a plot of two hundred and eighty acres, the estate has been extended to a domain of over five thousand acres. From a span of a few



OFFICE BUILDING ABOUT 1882





hundred feet along the lake it has been increased to a length of about eight miles, and approaches New Paltz to within a mile. This is sufficient to show the growth in mere acreage and to afford a startling contrast to that first but most important purchase made in the summer of '69.

But the growth in territory, while interesting enough, is after all the least important phase of the development of Mohonk. The land so acquired meant something else; it meant that the hotel was growing and it meant especially that tremendous energy had to be turned to the development and to the beautifying of that land. The old Stokes House that stood near the lake, as already intimated, underwent immediate changes. To this was added the old dining-room wing. Back of this and on a level with the cliffs

the small parlor building was erected and became one of the memorable features of early Mohonk. "The Little Parlor," with its expressive, cosy chairs and its genteel habituées, grew, to some of those interesting little ladies, almost sacred. While this section was still standing, the old original office wing was demolished and the first enlargement of the business part of the house was made in 1880. Subsequently the large parlor section was erected. Beyond this, in 1879, the present Rock Building rose. In 1892-93 the present dining-room and the new kitchen were added. The old dining-hall was divided into temporary rooms and this wing preserved till 1902 when it was torn down and the central section extending from the office to the new dining-room erected. In 1899 the large office building, containing small rooms above and



THE "OLD BOYS"

Mr. Yorke	Judge Perkins	Gov. Odell	Mr. Craven	Mr. Marshall	Col. Franklin
Dr. Cuyler	Mr. Smiley	Judge Goodrich			



the old Lake Reading-room, was demolished and the present structure with the great parlor took its place. And finally, as the last process in the evolution of the House as it now stands, in 1901-02, the lofty stone section supplanted the old parlor wing. At each stage there disappeared some feature of old Mohonk, grown to be cherished by the guests, and it was perplexing at times to decide whether to be guided by sentiment or necessity. The oldest part of the present hotel is the Rock Building erected in 1879—and every vestige of the other sections standing at that time has disappeared.

Meanwhile the development of the grounds went on with great rapidity. Wild nature came up to the very doors of the hotel and rough paths or trails had been broken only to prominent points. Not infrequently guests lost

their way on the long tramps, and on one occasion a lady despairing of ever getting home became hysterical and set up heart-rending shrieks till help came. She was found standing less than two hundred feet from the house.

To make accessible the beauty and romance of the mountain, the systematic construction of paths was begun. Through labyrinth and forest, over ravines and under precipices, through fissure and cavern and solemn vales, year after year the trails were made and the trails then widened into walks, till one could well nigh spend a summer in tramping without the repetition of a path; and it is one of the pleasantest memories of those earlier days to recall the forenoon tours led by Mr. Smiley himself, when scores of guests both young and old went forth with Alpine stocks to explore the mysteries of the

Shawangunk range. Gradually along these paths sprang up the rustic seats with straw-thatched roofs, peculiar to Mohonk; and as time went on the names of distinguished visitors were given to these picturesque houses, of which at present there must be no less than one hundred and fifty.

For years the only drive, and that a rough one, was what was known as Whitney Road, leading over to Mountain Rest. Later came a beautiful road called Woodland Drive, circling about the base of Eagle Cliff through the chestnut forest. In quick succession roads were built to Cope's Lookout, North Lookout, Eagle Cliff and Sky Top, involving at some points the highest engineering skill. Bonticou Drive came in 1895; the long winding forest road—Oakwood Drive—followed in 1898; the bold and romantic Laurel

Ledge Road in 1900; Undercliff and Terrace Drive in 1903; the great road to Minnewaska in 1907; all of these drives presenting model examples of road making under surprising difficulties, surprisingly overcome.

The demolition of the old stables in 1888, marked the real beginning of the extensive gardens. The land thus liberated grew rapidly larger, and, as already mentioned, no one who has not seen the untamable jungle beyond this point could appreciate the combined enthusiasm and energy required to transform all that into the blossoming acres that now stretch almost to the crest of the mountain. What that garden yields in variety and color, what it succeeds in producing against apparently natural obstacles, is a story by itself. There are six thousand rose bushes of the choicest kinds, five thou-



WASHINGTON PROFILE



THE TRAPPS

sand pæonies, four thousand phlox, eight thousand bedding plants, and one of the largest collections of herbaceous perennials and shrubs in the country.

No words can convey any conception of the difficulties that confronted the new owner of Mohonk when he really began to exploit the mountains for roads and flower beds. Gardening with Mr. Smiley was dangerously near a passion. As nature had arranged things at Mohonk there seemed to be only two places for growing flowers—on the quartz rocks and on the branches of trees. A remote third might have been on the lake—a floating garden. There was not a square of a hundred feet where anything but ferns and lichens could hold on—and it had taken some of the lichens a hundred years or more to cover a few inches. The old

guests with records of thirty summers are the only ones who can really appreciate the miracle of the gardens. They can look back to the time when Mr. Smiley used to point with pride to a bed of geraniums on the side of the road close to the water and to a delicate white birch tree that looked like a frail child—not long for this world. He succeeded in stringing those geraniums along the road as it swings over the bridge and to the south, and every bud cost him, probably, five dollars. Anybody caught plucking one would doubtlessly have paid ten or have been sent away. He classed that sin with drink. Gradually these ganglia of flowers began to grow. Larger beds were made—soil was brought long distances and all around the exterior of the house plants were made to flourish in especially fortified enclosures and in soil that

practically had to be renewed to the last particle every year. Finally when the old stables near the bowling-alleys were removed in 1888 the present garden, as already noted, began its remarkable expansion. Beyond the stables lay a wilderness of boulders and cliffs. To civilize this was literally asking Faith to remove mountains. It was done partly, perhaps, to provide space for flowers. It was more likely that the impossible nature of the task acted as a challenge. It is always so with intrepid engineers—pole seekers—besiegers. Getting the land may have been the hardest thing Mr. Smiley ever did—but taming it gave him the greatest delight of his life. He did not rest until he had coaxed into blossom nearly twenty acres of that hopeless slope of the mountain. Most of the earth was brought a mile or more—and the won-

der is, still, how it is ever kept in place. To this garden Mr. Smiley has given no end of time and intelligent care, and his reward has been, as he himself says, "a long life and abounding health."

Unique as the physical history of Mohonk has been, it is doubtless the spirit of the place that ultimately distinguishes it from all others. Its well known silent code relating to the common nuisances of liquor, dancing, card playing and Sabbath breaking gave it a certain eminence from the start. The truth about these rules is that Mr. Smiley never made any rules. He never, in fact, had any intention of conducting a hotel; at least, of conducting one on conventional plans. His guests were, at first, nearly all of them personal friends. They came very much as they would have come to his private home. It proved to most of



VIEW FROM EAGLE CLIFF ROAD



SKY TOP ROAD

them a refreshing delight to find one place in the land free from the despotic sway of a bar, of noisy dancing and bad music, of monopolizing card parties, and of a Sunday that differed from no other day. Some of them used to remark that it had the restful isolation of an ocean voyage—though in these days of wireless, the invasion of Mohonk remains even less than that of the Atlantic. The first noticeable result was in the personnel of the guests. The house never advertised and never sought publicity. Mr. Smiley himself met every guest on arrival and was present always to say God-speed. The native atmosphere of the place brought speedily together a body of well-bred, unostentatious, thoughtful people. They were not of any particular type or caste. A classification of any of those early registers would show a widely

representative group of American men of affairs. Lawyers, doctors, scholars, bankers, merchants and executives came in great numbers—and continued to come year after year. That was the abiding feature. It became a settled summer abode for scores of well-known families. It was perhaps noticeably free from the ultra-fashionable, mercerized or newspaper society, and has always remained so. Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler, who came to Mohonk first in 1879, describes his immediate meeting with many prominent people. He found here the nieces of Washington Irving; he met for the first time the merchant philanthropist, William E. Dodge; Arnold Guyot, the distinguished scientist—for whom Guyot's Hill is named; Philip Schaff, the tireless scholar, editor, friend of all the world's great thinkers. He records his



THE FLOWER GARDENS

meeting here with Mrs. Grant, wife of the soldier President; with President Hayes—and Roosevelt and Waring; with Edward Everett Hale, Justices Brewer and Strong, Senator Dawes and many, many more. For nearly thirty consecutive summers Dr. Cuyler himself lent to the sparkling intellectual life of Mohonk no small measure.

It would be strange indeed if a gathering of serious and prominent people like this could happen so often and so steadily without something more than mere social results. In 1879, Mr. Albert Smiley was appointed by President Hayes to the Board of Indian Commissioners. Surrendering himself to a conscientious study of the problems he became convinced that they needed more discussion and care than the Indian Bureau could give them. In the fall of 1883, he called the first Confer-

ence of Friends of the Indians. He invited to that first week's conference a group of men and women either expert or vitally interested in Indian affairs and in the betterment of Indian conditions. It discussed, what subsequent conferences continued to do, every phase of the Indian service and plead jealously for the purity and the honor of all relations of our National Government to that service. The consequences of these annual discussions are matters of record—the whole public sentiment has been changed and the recommendations of the Conference have passed into actual legislation. The first Conference had for its President, General Clinton B. Fisk. Among the distinguished men who have since filled the office may be mentioned the late Philip C. Garrett, Dr. Merrill E. Gates, Hon. John D. Long, Judge

Andrew S. Draper, Hon. Charles J. Bonaparte, and Elmer E. Brown.

The reforms demanded in the Indian Service being practically realized, the Conference of 1904 decided to broaden its field to include the welfare of colonial peoples, and the name was changed to "Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian and Other Dependent Peoples." Under this title the work of the Conference goes on, and in October of each year Mr. Smiley continues to invite to Mohonk as his personal guests for three days several hundred people to discuss questions and to suggest measures relating to colonial affairs.

The Conference on International Arbitration met first in the month of June in 1895 at Mohonk when Mr. Smiley invited about fifty persons of note and influence to come together and to form

some organized plan for the study and discussion of that great subject. The purpose was from the first reasonable and definite. It proposed to discuss all practical means for substituting arbitration for war, to suggest and to urge methods and mechanism for the settlement of international differences, and to keep the public steadily informed of its economic features and possibilities. These Conferences, increasing from fifty persons in 1895 to more than three hundred in 1910, have brought together not only the influential people of our own country, but many distinguished statesmen, diplomats, jurists and educators of other countries. The activity of the Conference, no longer confined to its brief session, is now continuous. It maintains a permanent office, a permanent secretary, furnishes statistics and in-



UNDERCLIFF ROAD



THE GREAT CREVICE

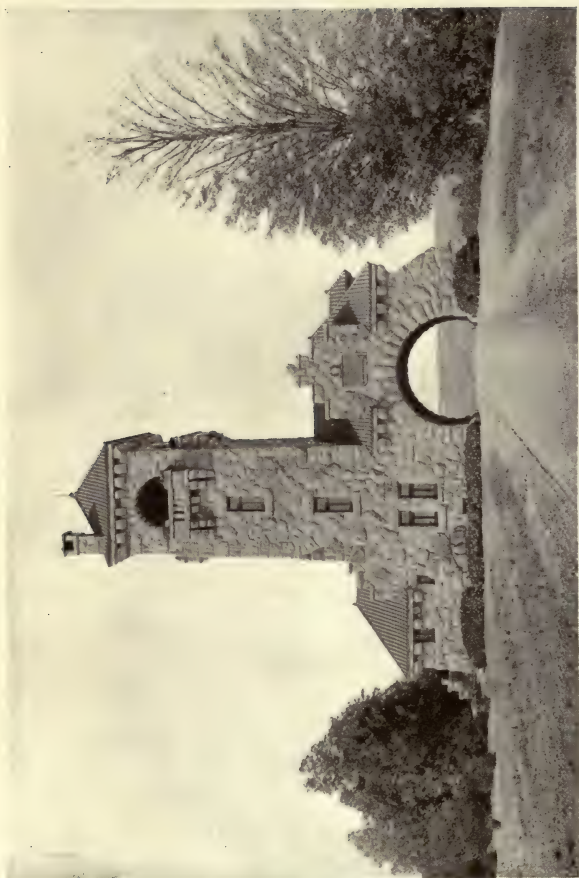


formation to the press and to the public, and carries on wide and effective propaganda. Nearly two hundred boards of trade and chambers of commerce, representing the largest cities of the land, co-operate with the Conference, and many of them maintain arbitration committees and send delegates. It has brought about the introduction of the study into various universities and colleges; has done much to inspire the foundation of the New York Peace Society, the Inter-collegiate Peace Society, the American Society of International Law; and finally, as a significant recognition of its achievements, Albert K. Smiley has been named as one of the administrators of Andrew Carnegie's gift of ten million dollars to the cause of international peace.

It is little wonder, therefore, that to the army of guests who have climbed

to Mohonk for the past forty years, it should have grown to be a sort of citadel—morally embattled and fearless of the foe; and little wonder, too, that these same guests should conceive the wish to dignify the approach to such a fortress by some formal and expressive portal, and so honor the life and work of its master spirit. The Testimonial Gateway, erected to commemorate the golden anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Smiley's wedding, serves thus the double purpose, and constitutes a unique and remarkable testimony to the public services of the place and of the man.

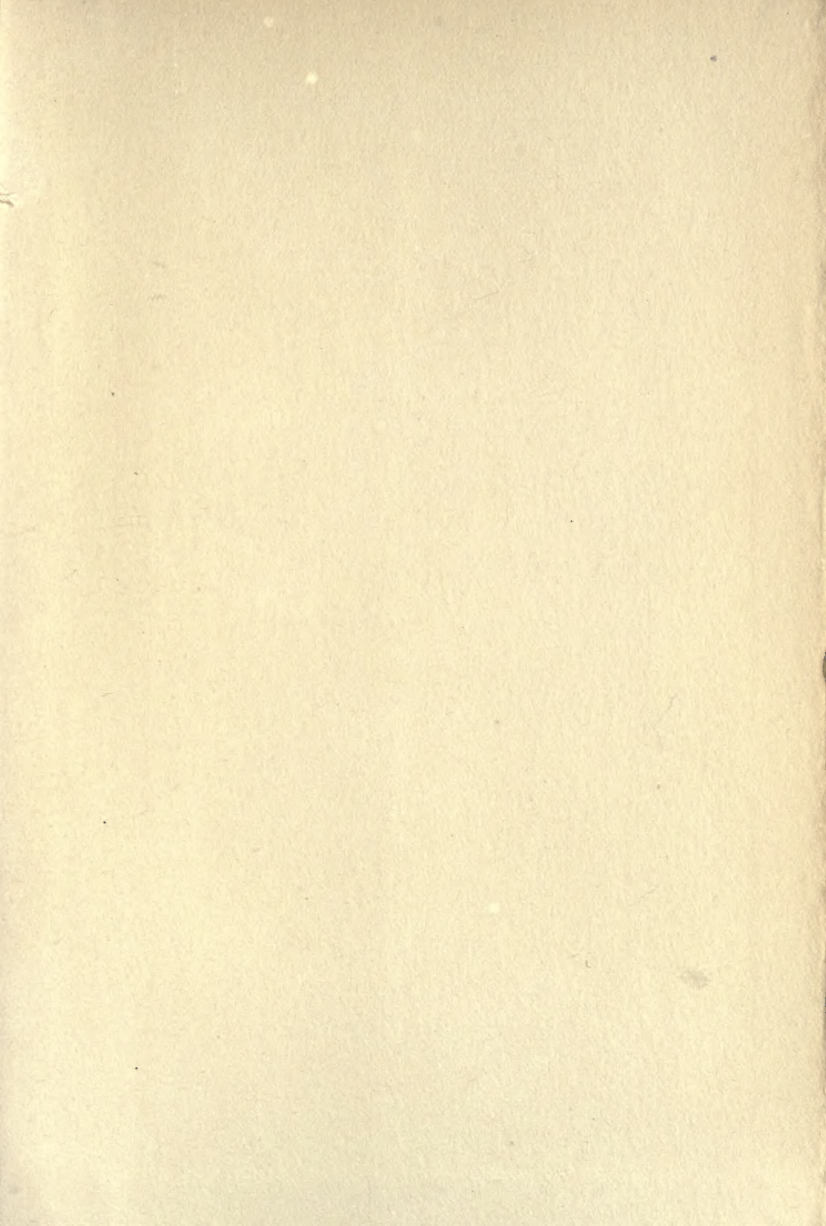
The story of Mohonk then, becomes obviously no simple chronicle of a mountain resort—the annals of a pleasant community of summer guests. Its material success, however amazing, has created only the setting for movements

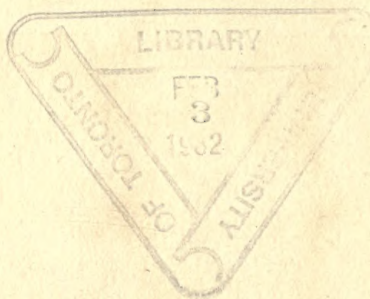


TESTIMONIAL GATEWAY

that have long since been justified and which, affecting the honor and welfare of the country, have also done much to foster new ideals of human obligations, and to inspire new hopes for the intercourse of men.







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